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ABSTRACT

The role of parents of handicapped children in a team approach to educational programming is discussed. Noted are rights of parents, such as the right to review evaluations and school records, to appeal the types of tests and evaluation procedures employed by the school, and to obtain independent evaluation of the child. Such attitudes and problems of educators as perception of the parent role as an inactive one, neglect of training needed for effective interaction with parents, a negative view of the entire package designed to ensure educational opportunities for the handicapped, and a feeling of a lack of management and instructional skills necessary to serve handicapped children, are explored. Also described are attitudes and problems of parents, such as lack of skill or desire to become involved, lack of time or financial resources, and lack of education or familiarity with the school environment. Suggestions are made to foster greater parent involvement, including providing parents with work areas and supplies in the school, opportunities for social interaction with school personnel, counseling, and parent groups. Recommended is the definition of the roles of the other team members (teacher, administrator, psychologist, social worker, speech therapist) as well as the role of the parent. (BD)

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The Role of the Parent in a Team Approach to Effective Educational Programming

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Recent events have made it necessary to examine more fully the role of the parent within the educational system. This issue has emerged as a result of recent federal and state legislation which has insured the right to education for handicapped children and of the regulations which have stipulated that parents be involved in the educational programming of their handicapped child.

Within the last several years expectations for continued and expanded parent involvement (Gearheart, 1972) have been realized, and, more recently, the role of the parent as a member of the educational planning team has been advocated (Kroth, 1977). Even though active parent involvement is a laudable goal with the potential of exerting a positive influence on programs for handicapped children, not all educators have positive attitudes towards parents as team members. A discrepancy therefore exists between the legislative intent and the prevailing attitude (and skill level) of educators and other professionals. Negative attitudes, however subtle, present barriers to the proposed active involvement of parents in the placement and planning process.

Lack of support for the active involvement of parents of handicapped children is symptomatic of attitudes concerning parents in general which exist within the entire educational system. Relatively few parents of "normal" children perceive

themselves or feel that others perceive them as team members who are actively involved in the planning or evaluation of their child's progress. In fact, many parents feel alienated from the schools. However, parents, especially those whose children are not attaining adequate progress or are not receiving appropriate services, are urged to become more actively involved.

If the goal is a team approach which includes parents and truly attempts to increase effective educational programming, then educators and parents must be prepared to make a series of significant changes. Such changes must be based not only on a knowledge of legislative mandates and judicial decisions but also on new attitudes as well as training in conference skills. Only then will the interaction patterns currently existing between parents and school personnel change to allow for active involvement of parents of handicapped children.

RIGHTS OF PARENTS

Laws such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) were in part designed to reduce arbitrary decision making and misjudgments by educators and other professionals. The rules and regulations of legislation (Federal Register, 1977) have provided a framework for the emergence of a more active and direct parent role. For example, due process insures

that parents may review evaluations and school records, appeal the kinds of tests and evaluation procedures employed by the school, and obtain independent evaluation of their child. In some states, such as Michigan, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, parents are to attend planning meetings. The opportunities for parents to be actively involved in the educational planning process for their children have emerged with these recent legislative and legal activities. However, the degree to which such opportunities will be realized is dependent on the attitudes of both parents and educators.

ATTITUDES AND PROBLEMS OF EDUCATORS

Attitudes of educators towards parental involvement, although usually officially positive, in reality range from total disassociation to attendance upon request at school meetings. Some educators blame parents for the child's problem and want to rescue children from their parents (Jersild, 1955), while some teachers need love or power (Redl and Wattenberg, 1959). The parent may be viewed by educators as anywhere from an observer to a decision maker. Unfortunately, too many professionals tend to perceive the parent role as inactive rather than active.

In a survey of 1,500 team members in Connecticut, more than 50 percent of the respondents indicated that there were only two activities appropriate for parents: presenting information about a case and gathering informa-

tion about their child (Yoshida et. al., 1978). A very low percentage of the professionals surveyed felt that the parent should review the student's educational progress and the appropriateness of the student's program, judge the appropriateness of various program alternatives, and last, participate in the final decision-making process. This study illustrates the high degree of incongruence between judicial and legislative initiatives to increase parent participation and the current attitude of professionals in the field.

This situation is unfortunate because there is ample evidence that involvement of parents can facilitate the development of a handicapped child (Hawkins, et. al., 1966; Fudala, et. al., 1972; Johnson and Katz, 1973; Johnson and Lobitz, 1974; Kelly, et. al., 1977). In addition, there is evidence which indicates that parental involvement in education--including Head Start and Follow Through programs--has positive results on the accomplishments of children and that these achievements are long term in effect (Willmon, Gordon, J., 1972). If parents can be involved in educational and therapeutic interventions, they can certainly be integrated into the educational planning and placement process. Too frequently, however, professionals ignore the findings. Even when they allow for active involvement of parents, educators tend to neglect the intensive training effort often needed

for effective interactions.

In addition, educators, as represented by unions, have often reflected a negative view of the entire package designed to ensure educational opportunities for the handicapped. Although officially approving the concepts represented by the legislation (American Teacher, 1977), union leaders have also voiced negative and exaggerated descriptions of its implementation. For example, in discussing the education of handicapped children in the least-restrictive environment, one spokesman emphasized indiscriminate integration of the most severely involved children and gave misinformation on the required responsibility of school personnel (nurses, etc.), increased workloads, and difficulties in classroom management (Shanker, 1977). More recently, job security and class size based on the number of handicapped children in a class have become bargaining issues for some union representatives (Gerwitz, 1978).

The union's negative coverage, in addition to other factors such as the teacher's lack of experience with handicapped children, contributes to the teacher's participation in a conference with a less than ideal attitude.

Several surveys (Flynn, et. al., 1978; Alberto, et. al., 1978; Cook and Price, 1977) have indicated that among regular education classroom teachers there are feelings of ineptitude and anxiety concerning children with special

needs. Teachers feel that they lack the critical management and instructional skills necessary to serve handicapped children. In addition, they often feel resentful or intimidated by other members of a school's planning team (i.e., special educators, psychologists, administrators).

Teachers entering a planning conference, therefore, bring with them not only questions and concerns about the legislation and parent involvement but fears relative to the handicapped children and to the other professionals at school conferences. All of these concerns and fears can interfere with the dynamic role of parents as provided by recent legislation.

ATTITUDES AND PROBLEMS OF PARENTS

The attitudes of parents towards their own involvement in the planning process is as diverse and confusing as those of educators. Parents more often than not have a history of negative involvement with the school and with professionals. Coming into the conference, parents may range in attitude toward professionals from extremely negative and hostile to extremely positive and cooperative.

There is another range of attitudes that parents may hold, and this involves the choice of whether or not to become actively involved in the planning process. The legislation encourages parent involvement. But not all parents have a similar degree of skill or desire to become involved. Parents have a history of nonparticipation

in school decisions because they believe that "professionals know what is best" and that "parents are only parents." Parents often feel inept and uninformed. Sometimes they feel that planning activities are the teacher's job, not theirs. At other times, particularly when parents hold minority status, they feel alienated from the system. The choice of degree of involvement, however, should be made by parents. They should decide the point at which they want to become actively involved and the degree to which they seek such involvement.

As parents enter conferences they may have a variety of concerns or anxieties about not only their children but themselves. Some of their problems are financial and can be related to activities required for conference preparation or participation. Some costs are incurred because of their absence from work while attending the conference; other costs may be related to payments for transportation or babysitter services. Frequently parents need to review or copy medical reports or school records, and time and costs of these procedures can become a burden. In one public school district for example, the duplication or copying charge for school records is one dollar per page. It is not uncommon for an independent evaluation by a physician or psychologist to be necessary, especially if the diagnosis or recommendations by school personnel differs from those of the family. The services of an attorney

may be necessary for hearings or appeals, and the costs for these services are again the responsibility of the parent.

In addition to discussing and negotiating issues concerning their child, parents are thus often required to expend energy, time and financial resources in order to prepare for school conferences. Such expenses can be a serious hardship. These costs may also present barriers to the efficient collection of information prior to a conference and create distractions during interactions with school personnel. Educational institutions usually have legal services readily available, whereas parents do not usually have easy access to such resources. An examination of the costs that may be involved for a parent preparing for a conference illustrates one of the less-understood problems which may impede the parent's ability to function as a team member with school personnel.

Another critical problem area involves the required interactions with school personnel at meetings. Some parents feel they have no time for involvement since they work on a full-time basis, and conferences with educators are often anxiety provoking and no-win situations for parents. Although parent's rights have been guaranteed by legislation, many of these rights are not commonly exercised. Parents frequently feel unsuccessful or dissatisfied with themselves and with the outcomes of school

meetings. They often [illegible], and in many instances the concept of a team approach is more a myth than a reality. Even if parents enter a conference with the skills and attitudes required for active participation, the chances are that if they use such skills they will be perceived as aggressive and untrusting. Parents who exercise even the most basic human rights, such as asking questions, rejecting ideas, expressing opinions, or denying requests, seem to be "bucking the system." Such behaviors, parents fear, can result in negative consequences for their child (Markel and Greenbaum, 1977).

Some discomfort is felt by parents who are uneducated or unfamiliar with school environments. Even parents who are knowledgeable about the legislation and who have advance graduate training report that they feel at a disadvantage when facing a group of school personnel. Parents may be concerned about the appropriateness of their dress, their lack of education or their inability to express themselves. Based on a "medical model," a hierarchy of decision makers exist in which the expert in the field, physician or psychologist, is seen as the individual with the major responsibility for decision making and leadership, while the client (the parent/child) is viewed as the receiver of services. In such a system the parent is expected to be passive and to exert the least degree of influence.

Responsibility for and power to make decisions concerning the handicapped child has in the past rested within a professional hierarchy based on educational degrees. The hierarchy includes, from top to bottom, physician, psychologist, administrator, consultant, and teacher, all of whom may or may not agree with each other.

Unfortunately, a significant amount of intimidation, hostility, and distrust may surface between professionals at educational planning meetings. Such conflict creates confusion for parents. In addition, parents are easily intimidated by almost everyone at a conference. Teachers, although perhaps a bit less vulnerable, also report threatened by administrators or specialists who, they feel, are judging their competence or can make things uncomfortable for them if they differ from official school recommendations.

In general, this traditional hierarchy tends to preclude effective information sharing and fair decision making, since a significant proportion of those at school conferences enter with feelings of anxiety and are therefore easily intimidated. If the two groups who are most intimately involved with the handicapped child, parents and teachers, have such feelings, then the stage is set for inefficient and ineffective program planning.

In recent years the physician's role in the general management of patients has been changing, with some physicians advocating a more active and dynamic role for the

patient. The patient is thus viewed not only as a consumer with rights but as a valuable source of information and part of a decision-making team. The role of the physician in the management of handicapped children has also changed. P.L. 94-142 has led to a shift in emphasis from the so-called "medical model" (Palfrey, Mervis and Butler, 1978). Hopefully the "educational model" will facilitate rather than deter the inclusion of the important input parents can provide in the decision-making process.

However, the critical factor or emphasis must focus on the freedom of choice by the parent relative to the degree of involvement in school affairs (Gordon, 1972). Caring for the handicapped child and supporting the rest of the family may be a great burden, allowing little physical or emotional energy for educational planning or meetings. Increasing positive parental attitudes towards the school and a willingness to participate actively will be a slowly evolving process.

TRAINING

Since parents now can influence the educational development of their handicapped child, our educational institutions bear a responsibility for helping them become more effective in the planning process.

There are numerous things schools can do to foster greater parent involvement. First, they might, at least in central administrative facilities, designate an area for

parents to use when looking at files or reviewing materials. Even the allocation of a table or desk for this purpose would make the parent feel welcome and more a part of the system. Next, the school might provide the parent with some basic supplies, such as paper, pencil, and eraser, for use when reviewing files prior to conferences or taking notes during a meeting.

A team approach to educational programming for the handicapped child requires that parents be perceived and perceive themselves as partners of school personnel rather than as adversaries. The development of such attitudes requires training at preservice and inservice levels. For example, since 1970 the University of Michigan Program in Special Education has sponsored a preservice practicum/ seminar course instructed by a parent and entitled: Family and Community Life of the Handicapped Child. Students have interacted and provided service to over 100 families. Presentations by parents, siblings and community leaders are integral to the seminar, while communication and joint planning are stressed during the field experience.

Educators and ancillary personnel must realize the benefits of such a parental role and their own responsibility for facilitating the more active participation of parents in a variety of ways, but it will, in many cases, require commitment and creativity to foster and maintain programs in which parents plan a significant and continuing

role in the education of their handicapped child. Teachers and administrators must not automatically assume that parents are uninterested simply because they do not come to school or play an active role during a conference. Work, family problems, shyness, lack of knowledge, skill or understanding, and, unfortunately, a history of disappointment, frustration, and failure with the schools may all interfere with parents' desires to become actively involved.

To help parents, school personnel could initiate short social interactions that are unrelated to specific educational programs or problems. Saturday or evening meetings are possibilities that should be considered. Another possibility is class "potluck" suppers for the entire family, held at the school with baby sitters or aides for the children to keep them busy while parents and teachers interact. Feeling welcome and comfortable in a social context can be what parents need for honest and effective communication and cooperation during a planning conference.

It may be helpful for the educator to assist parents in determining the appropriate degree of their involvement and activity. Such counseling may lead to a significant amount of informal or formal parent training prior to official conferences or meetings. But growth of parents in self-awareness or in skills should occur before and not during a conference. The official task during a

conference is the placement or programming of the handicapped child, not parent or teacher training.

A professional in the system--administrator, social worker, psychologist, or librarian--should raise the issue of teacher attitudes towards parent involvement. This critical issue must be raised and dealt with honestly. If teacher attitudes are negative, they can be more effectively changed through a discussion of the issues and by training than by avoidance and stereotypic thinking.

If schools have the responsibility for program planning but have problems and limited resources to meet this responsibility, then parents should help school personnel. Parents who assume more active roles may have to view themselves as case managers. They can act as liaison between professionals both internal and external to the school. Long-term record keeping is another critical function parents may perform.

Parent organizations can supply valuable services for their members. For example, individually or in groups, parents can provide peer counseling and discuss training needs with each other (Markel, 1977). The more experienced and assertive parent can assist and nurture those who are less skilled. Whether in a structured organization or an informal support group, parents should be encouraged to meet with other parents <u>without</u> the presence of teachers or professionals. Parents need opportunities to discuss

feeling and issues free from any "intimidation," real or imagined, by professionals. An important source of parent education has been provided by parent organizations and educators should not hesitate to refer parents to these groups (Cain, 1976). The teacher can act as a resource, however, to be called only when help is necessary in some area of expertise.

TEAM APPROACH

A team comprised of the teacher, administrator, parent, perhaps a psychologist, social worker, speech therapist, or others has the primary task of designing an individualized educational plan for the handicapped child. The intent of the legislation is that the best possible plan or program be designed and that those people most intimately involved with the child be the primary decision makers. If this group is viewed as a team, it is necessary to consider the leadership and responsibility of the various members. After defining the parent's role, the role of the other team members, their responsibilities for setting criteria for the program, ways the program will be evaluated, and dates for such evaluation must all be determined. The rules the team plays by must also be identified--too frequently a conference is spent trying to decide the rules of the game rather than attending to the needs of the child.

There is no one role for the parent any more than there is only one role for the teacher or administrator.

The efforts to plan effective programming for the handicapped child and the problems created by the varied responses to the legislative mandates have produced a time of confusion and uncertainty. New roles and attitudes on the part of parents and professionals are necessary and are developing, but their emergence will require time, training, and experimentation. Obviously, there will be both success and failure. Parents and school personnel must fact these uncertainties together and assist each other with their new and emerging roles, with one goal in mind: effective programming for handicapped children.

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